

Tax may revive Superfund program

New Jersey senator to propose reinstating tax on polluting industries

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HELENA — Plans to reinstate a tax on polluting industries to operate the national Superfund program are expected to be announced today in Washington, D.C., according to information from Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont.

The effort is of special interest in Montana, where cleanup of one of the nation's top Superfund priorities — the town of Libby — has been slowed for lack of funds.

Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., is expected to announce the effort to raise \$8.3 billion over five years by reinstating the tax on polluting industries that expired in 1995, according to Baucus.



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"Throughout Max's entire career he has supported the polluter pays principle and, as an original author of the Superfund law, he just doesn't think that Montanans and Americans should get holding the bag for cleanup when corporations like W.R. Grace go belly up," said Barrett Kaiser, spokesman for Baucus.

The original Superfund program had a trust fund to pay for cleaning up contaminated industrial sites when the company responsible for the mess could not afford to pay. The fund was filled with money from a tax on certain polluting industries. Since that tax expired in 1995, Baucus said, the trust fund is now running out of money and the Superfund program is increasingly relying on money from regular taxpayers.

"We simply can't afford to wait and continually be told, 'There simply is no money.'"

— Gayla Benefield,
president of the Lincoln County
Asbestos Relief Organization

Montana has 14 Superfund sites, including Libby, where an abandoned vermiculite mine and ensuing asbestos contamination has killed and sickened hundreds of people.

That project is slated as one of the nation's top cleanup Superfund priorities, said John Wardell, director of the Environmental Protection Agency's

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Region 8 Montana office in Helena. The cleanup of that site has been pushed back by several years.

"That's because of money," Wardell said.

Jim Christiansen, the Superfund project manager of the Libby site, said the cleanup was originally supposed to take between three and five years. He now thinks the project will take another six or seven.

A tight cleanup budget was one of the reasons remediation crews had their wages cut earlier

this year.

Gayla Benefield, a Libby resident and president of the Lincoln County Asbestos Relief Organization, said "it's about time" to reinstate the so-called "polluter pays."

Dribbled along with little money, the cleanup of some Superfund sites in Montana is lasting as long as the original polluting industry initially operated.

"We simply can't afford to want and continually be told, 'There simply is no money,'" Benefield said. People need to understand, she said, that the companies made billions from these mines, and it's our tax dollars that are left to clean it up. "It's simply unfair," she said.